

Sacred Hope

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 9, 2023

Pause for a moment and imagine the Red Sea stretching for miles across plummeting depths hosting menacing waters. An impassable body of water – a blockade for a group of fleeing people who carried with them only the clothes on their backs and their unleavened bread. While each migrant held within only a desperate hope for escape, their God lifted the waters, one massive wall of water on the left, one on the right, with a path created between the two for the Israelites to safely cross. The imagery captures the plight of the enslaved ancient Israelites fleeing bondage. Now, imagine two women filled with grief approaching the tomb of their dead savior – a man who loved radically and who had died three days prior – only to find a cave which was empty of his body now playing host to an angel, assuring the women that Jesus had risen.

These are simple vignettes capturing but a moment of two stories held sacred by those of the Jewish and Christian faiths – stories of resistance, and stories of hope. We have the Jewish narrative of enslaved ancestors fleeing bondage, leaving the known for the unknown, beginning a dangerous and unpredictable journey of forty years through a barren desert, hoping for a better life. We have the Christian narration of Easter which, for the sake of this sermon, I have decided to separate into two pieces. One being the life and acts of Jesus before his untimely death – exploring the life of a man who embodied love, resisting any inclination of hate in those around him. The second being the miracle of his resurrection, his transition from death to new life, reassuring Christians of the power of hope and love.

What, in these biblical narrations, in these stories of resistance and hope, is the role of God, and how does this translate today? Moses was a prophet who led the ancient Israelites through the towering waters of the parting Red Sea and the expansive desert. The acts of the prophet Moses began in response to the appearance of God speaking to him through the form of a burning bush – a miraculous bush not consumed by the blazing flames. Through this unusual

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form God instructed Moses to save the Israelites from slavery and suffering by leading them to a land of freedom. God, in the story of Passover, is akin to a God of modern-day liberation theology. This is a theology that articulates God as being on the side of the oppressed, having preferential treatment for those who are marginalized and suffering – not those immersed in privilege and frivolous excess. Those who are in bondage – those immersed in evils akin to this tale of ancient slavery. If this is the call of the divine, would we be remiss not to listen? Should we, in partnership with the sacred, reach towards those who most need our help? In this ancient story God sent a series of plagues to the oppressors – covering the slaveholders in darkness, sending swarms of locusts and lice. In this story God parted the immense and treacherous Red Sea as a means for the escape of the oppressed.

This, in a way, runs parallel to our Easter story. Jesus, to those of the Christian faith, is divine, God in human form. Where does this divine being focus his attention? On the distained, the ostracized, the condemned and the marginalized. Jesus loved those whom society shunned. And God, in this story, assured all that love, kindness, and hope would ultimately persevere, stronger than hate, violence, and anger as God resurrected Jesus from the dead. Can we, too, seek out the marginalized as Jesus did? Can we, too, even in the harshest and bleakest moments in our lives, know that goodness and love will ultimately prevail – that compassion and kindness are stronger than all else – even death?

The protagonists in these sacred and holy stories are those who faced oppression. Passover narrates persecuted and enslaved peoples controlled by a ruthless leader. I think of the current day refugees in our midst – those fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine – or the South American migrants crossing the expansive, barren, and dangerous desert held between North and South America – akin to the barren land the Israelites traversed for forty years. Can we see in the modern-day migrants the same resignation, determination, and sorrow held in those of millennia past? Can our compassion for the Israelites extend towards the suffering of this century? Easter elaborates upon the least of these – a term for the marginalized in many forms – distained peoples hidden and ostracized from the whole – those whose lives were devoid of

love, compassion, and respect. Jesus himself faced oppression, deemed a danger and an enemy and condemned to death as a common criminal. He was an enemy and a danger because of his radical acts of love – touching the untouchable, praying with the destitute. And yet nothing deferred him from his profound and unconditional acts of kindness and compassion. May we not be deterred either.

Having set the stage for these ancient stories – our protagonists, these oppressed groups immersed in their own understanding of their God – let us enter the crux of our theme today – resistance.

The ancient Israelites were a determined community, joining as a united force to free themselves from the bondage of slavery. This story serves to articulate many forms of resistance, and today we highlight two, the first being the bravery to leave the known for the unknown. While determined to leave a life of exploitation and persecution, the unknown was terrifying as well – what waited beyond the walls of servitude? Their path to freedom was riddled with obstacles, most prominently, perhaps, the innate human aversion to change. Let us pause and bring these ancient sentiments into our own lives. There are ways we are held in bondage, even if not as traumatic as the ancient Israelites. There are those of us who suffer from addiction in any of its guises, there are those of us who are immersed in an unhappy or abusive relationship, there are those of us who struggle to embody our true identities. We know these things are bad, yes, but what of the terrors of sobriety or of a life without a partner or of a life where we can openly be gay or transgender or Jewish or Muslim or whatever faith speaks to our hearts and souls? What of the unknown, when we can remain in the familiarity with life at the status quo? And yet the ancient people fled, and entered the scene we began with, as God parted the massive Red Sea to create a path of escape.

Which leads to our second act of resistance: continuing along a path laden with obstacles while having trust in the sacred. After surmounting the hurdle of confronting change, they entered a barren desert to begin a lost and wandering journey that would last them four

decades. Throughout their extended and meandering voyage, they struggled with food insecurity, with death, with the terrors of ferocious wildlife. And yet their God sent them signs that they were held in the embrace of their holy, and they persevered. We are each on our own paths navigating our best way forward – may we trust what we hold sacred to guide us; may we search for those holy signs that tell us all will be well.

We also, today, hold sacred the resistance in the Easter story. Before his imprisonment the man Jesus resisted the status quo – he loved with all his heart the outcasts and the rejects – the ones who need love the most; and yet the ones who are the last to receive it – and his actions reflected this. Do we love those in tent cities? Do we love those in sleeping bags on the corners? And if we do, how do we care for them? Often, we need simply treat folks as human. Jesus, a rabbi, was not to touch those who were deemed untouchable, and yet he laid his hands upon a man with leprosy and with a simple loving touch the man felt healthy again. Not a miracle, but a simple act of love – treating someone as fully human. What about the story of the adulteress we heard earlier? Do we love those whom other faiths may deem as sinners? Well, I ask, just as Jesus asked, who among us has not done something other faiths could deem as sinful?¹ Let us not judge for that only breeds resentment and hostility. Let us resist the call to hate and offer compassion.

I also think of his resurrection as an act of resistance – a sacred, holy, and transformational act of God. The story maintains that God welcomed Jesus into new life – resisting the hate and violence that left him dead. I hold this Easter story deep in my bones because it tells us of the power of love. The embodiment of love – the man Jesus – died. Yet love was reborn – nothing, not even death – could keep love from all of those who needed it. Love prevails over all that is bad and harmful – especially that of the sacred, just as is held in our Unitarian theology. Love is stronger than hatred, than loneliness, than addiction, than anger, than a dysfunctional childhood – it allows us to heal. Let us cultivate this deep within. Love is stronger than illness or death. This is what we celebrate on Easter.

¹ John 8:2-11 NRSV

And so, we have stories of resistance held alongside the triumphs of freedom and love. Our protagonists resisted because they held within them sacred hope. So let us end with a word of hope – without which these stories would never have come to fruition. Hope – trusting that the impossible can become possible. The Israelites found their Promised Land, the early Christians found a love that not even death could deter. To these ancient theists, this meant trusting their God – their sacred – to guide them towards deliverance and new life. So, too, can we find this in the whispering wind all around us. So, too, can we find this in our prayers released to all things held sacred. With hope in our hearts – our very beings – we depart the known for the unknown not guided by fear but guided by promise – we can imagine that whatever lays ahead will not defeat us and in doing so find freedom. Hope offers a distant light when we are encased in darkness – the light of that angel in Jesus’ tomb or the light of a savior ascending to heaven. It gives us the strength to persevere because hope promises not hate but love, not anger but compassion – that that which harms will be overcome, and that that which heals will never die. So may we hope. May we hold sacred the distant glimmer of light signaling a brighter end to our journey, illuminating our path, promising us goodness, love, and a better life. May we hope.

May it be so, and Amen.